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# CHARLES DOUGHTY

BY MARTIN ARMSTRONG

THERE has befallen Charles Doughty the curious fate of becoming a classic in his lifetime as a writer of prose, while as a poet he remains incredibly neglected. It seemed possible that the new edition of *Travels in Arabia Deserta* might improve matters to some extent, but the public press, while showing a real admiration for Doughty the prose-writer, and while reminding us of what we had long known—that *Arabia Deserta* is a great classic—still fails to point out what most people do not know: that Doughty is a fine poet. It is to be hoped at least that this awakened or reawakened interest in the great book of travels will tempt many to go on from it to the poems.<sup>1</sup> And through the *Arabia Deserta* lies the proper approach to the poems, for they are, both in style and content, the sublimation of Doughty's prose; the record of things imagined as *Arabia Deserta* is the record of things seen, heard, and lived.

The most obvious and most usual attitude for the traveller among a strange race and a strange civilization is the subjective. He observes as one apart, he records and criticizes in terms of his own traditions: the reader is all the time aware of his presence, describing and explaining. But the miracle of *Arabia Deserta* is its complete objectivity. Reading it, we see the desert under our eyes, and watch in its process the primitive wandering life of its inhabitants. And among the nomads we see one, Khalil, living, speaking, feeling almost, as they. Doughty simply shows us the picture, and he himself, Khalil, is a consistent and native detail in it. Even his occasional outbursts of hatred and anger are not those of an alien, and where his wit and morality rise above theirs it is not in an English, a national

<sup>1</sup> In his poems Doughty employs an unusual scheme of punctuation which, for those unfamiliar with his work, is, I think, frequently apt to obscure the meaning. I have therefore ventured in my quotations to alter the original punctuation where it seemed helpful to do so.

—THE AUTHOR.

sense, but in a universal sense. Even when he criticizes the Arabs, he seems to do so out of their own mouths, as one of their own sages, and the criticism is simple, graphic, intense, a page of generalities summarized in a single particular.

The Fehjies eat the owl: for which they are laughed to scorn by the Beduw, that are devourers of some other vermin.

A comprehensive criticism of their narrow-minded bigotry is compressed into the cynicism of that bare statement.

Such objectivity can be achieved only through a great understanding and a great sympathy, but it is immensely reinforced by what some of Doughty's critics have labelled his "Elizabethan style." The primitive and unaccustomed effect of this style to modern ears, its simplicity, slowness, dignity, form an admirable medium for the simple, slow, primitive, and to us remote, life which it describes. Without an effort we close our eyes on modern Europe. But if style can do this for us, it is clear that in Doughty's hands it is no quaint pastiche, but a genuine and living thing, capable of vivid description and deep emotion. And yet its deepest emotions flow out with an unhurrying simplicity which is almost serene:

"Now God be with thee, my father Mohammed, and requite thee."

"God speed thee, Khalil," and he took my hand. Amm Mohammed went back to his own, we passed further: and the world, and death, and the inhumanity of religions parted us for ever.

And in this slight mention of a young man who died, the pathos emerges from an even barer simplicity:

This fresh and ruddy young man, more than any in the town, but not well minded, I found no more at my coming again: he lay some months already in an untimely grave.

The vast emptiness of the desert pervades the book, and through it runs the perpetual pathos of these lonely wandering lives, so transitory, so useless against the eternal desolation.

We journeyed forth in high plains . . . and in passages, stretching betwixt mountain cliffs of sandstone, cumbered with infinite ruins of fallen crags, in whose eternal shadows we built the booths of a day.

To read such a book is a great and refreshing experience. We lose ourselves in it till the wanderings become our wanderings:

we are exhausted by the long marches, chilled by the sharp night air, parched with thirst under blazing noons; and the writer's spontaneous cry becomes our own: "Oh, what bliss to the thirsty soul is in that light sweet water, welling soft and warm as milk, from the rock!" and we enjoy with him the consolation of evening and the camp-fire:

and pleasant those sounds of the spretting milk under the udders in the Arabs' vessels! food for man and health at a draught in a languishing country. The bowl brought in foaming, the children gather to it, and the guest is often bidden to sup with them, with his fingers, the sweet froth. . . .

Thomas Fuller, the seventeenth century divine, in his *Worthies of England*, published in 1662, wrote thus of the poet Spenser:

Most happy in English poetry: as his works do declare, in which the many Chaucerisms used (for I will not say affected by him) are thought by the ignorant to be blemishes, known by the learned to be beauties, to his book; which notwithstanding had been more saleable, if more conformed to our modern language.

The sentence, if we add *Spenserisms* to *Chaucerisms*, might be applied to the poet Doughty. His poetry, as I have said, is still neglected, and the chief reason for this neglect is that his poetic style is, even less than his prose style, "conformed to our modern language."

True style is a vital thing: it is bred in the bone and lived in the life, and no perseverance in imitation will ever achieve it. Doughty's style, archaistic both in word and syntax, with all its Spenserisms and Chaucerisms, is a real and living thing. To the reader approaching Doughty's poetry for the first time, this becomes evident in a remarkable manner. Beginning perhaps with *Adam Cast Forth* or *The Titans*, he is puzzled by the language, the meaning of a sentence frequently escapes him, the work may seem to him at first even clumsy and arid, and yet when he has laid it aside he will find that his mind is full of clear images which constitute an atmosphere, a world of their own, so that the memory of the poem is less the memory of a reading than the memory of an actual experience.

Doughty repeatedly proclaims himself a follower of Spenser and Chaucer, and indeed, if we judge by his language, all the great poets between Spenser and himself, in so far as they in-

fluence his work, might never have existed. This is not to say that Doughty derives exclusively from these two poets. In his poetry one dimly feels influences of a much more primitive ancestry. But it constitutes a true indication of his style to imagine that, from the long family-tree of English poets, in each of whom we feel to some degree the family tradition and relationship, a cadet branch put out at Spenser, and that branch begins and ends with Doughty.

Yet Doughty's relationship to Spenser and Chaucer is in reality superficial. It is true that we find in him the same golden serenity and the same genius for vivid pictorial detail which we find in Spenser, but the temperament through which each expresses these is widely different, and Doughty's actual relationship to Spenser is little more than one of words. He has adopted many of Spenser's words and phrases, just as Spenser adopted Chaucer's, but he is temperamentally as far from Spenser as Spenser is from Chaucer, in spite of the occasional closeness of their candid plagiarism.

Doughty's relationship to Chaucer, on the other hand, is not only one of words but also of syntax, so that we often catch in his verse the sound and rhythm of Chaucer.

Enough has been said to give some diagnosis of Doughty's poetic style, in the narrowest sense of that term, and to show how closely he follows Spenser in word and phrase, and Chaucer also in syntax. Yet the smallest acquaintance with the work of the three poets is enough to discover that the poetry of each is worlds apart from the others.

What then is the nature of Doughty's poetry? While carefully ignoring the savory appeal of a red-herring, I may safely say that the individuality of a poet emerges through his style, his matter, and his temperament. It would be an entertaining but insoluble puzzle to enquire how far Doughty's prose style is the outcome of his life in Arabia, and how far his conception of Arabia is the outcome of his style. But, since his poetic style is an intensification of his prose, it is perhaps not idle to say that his poetry has grown directly out of that great spiritual experience of *Arabia Deserta*. In his utterance there is a great cleanliness and a great emptiness. Being remote from our modern

language in texture, it escapes all the associations, the common-places, the obscurations with which the current tongue (written and spoken) is encrusted, and remains empty and unsullied. In this emancipation from the familiar, Doughty's language is capable of producing a background bare and sombre, richly strange because outside our daily habit, upon which the clear brilliance of words with a strong sense-stimulus leap out with the purity of primary colors. But potentialities such as these can be exploited only by one who, like Doughty, is a great craftsman in words. Doughty sees and feels with sharp accuracy, so that he convinces sometimes by mere exactitude of visual description, sometimes by producing a strongly emotional impression through a series of appropriate stimuli. His poetry is full of things seen,—mountains “upleaning in a calm divine”; a “deep swart pool of liquid flint”; “bees with wings as sheen as glass”; “sky-shouldering naked rocks”; goats “that in hillsides wont, reared on their hind shanks, mongst thymy rocks to browse the tender stalks”; ocean—“that blurred vast mirrow of Heaven's suns and stars”; flocks that stand “ewe behind ewe, and hang their horned heads.” Such phrases instantly become realities to us, because we are made to see vividly as the poet saw. This felicity is not confined to short phrases. I do not know where clouds have been so beautifully and so graphically described as in *The Titans*:

Sought other to vain kingdom of moist clouds,  
 Sky's unstaid flocks, without continuance:  
 Whereof there hang some on World-mountains' flanks  
 In guise of flocs of wool caught in the thorns.  
 Some (which pavilions of air-riding spirits)  
 Are listed as with gold and dyed in blood.

Other swart-hewed, fleet, big with tempests' wreak.  
 Udders of heaven some are, wind-driven the most,  
 Fleet, changeful daughters of the liquid loft  
 With tawny outblown locks. Some reared on height,  
 Seem steepy uprolling hills of snow, but hardly  
 Endure till morrow's day.

But what I may call Doughty's poetic accuracy is not confined to the thing seen, though it is perhaps preëminent in that. It extends to the other senses, and those atmospheres,—moods,

which are, as it were, subtler senses. It is this analytic quality in his verse, this feeling for the essentials which constitute a mood, that makes his simplest descriptions so good:

Come to the silver-streaming river's brinks,  
Under bee-murmuring boughs of linden sweet,  
In raiment clean upon the daisy grass  
They sit and cheerful hours spend till high noon  
Nigh draws.

There in a few lines lies the calm happiness of a summer noon, and yet how simply it is produced! *Silver-streaming, bee-murmuring, sweet, clean, daisy, cheerful!* It is easily dissected: and a flower, too, is easily dissected, but it has not yet been explained.

It is not merely because of the archaic language that, seeking to define Doughty's poetry, one is driven for similes to antique things. It is vitally akin to ancient things in the spaciousness, the serenity, the primitive simplicity of its spirit. One thinks of it as a great tapestry where clear and beautiful forms move across a darkly varied background, or as a huge rock-hewn temple, austere and bare at first sight, but adorned at closer view with exquisitely carved detail and with small bright flowers growing from its crevices. It is in fact the spirit of *Arabia Deserta*, the empty wilderness with the vivid contrast of numberless beautiful details of nature and humanity. There is in Doughty's poetry, to use the words in which he has so splendidly praised Chaucer's, "a justness and directness (springing from ingenuous disposition, and diligent searching-out and observation of natural and human things, with knowledge and meditation of the tongue) which touches men's hearts: a certain noble height and living fulness of song: as if his vein flowed from the island-wells of Nature herself."

That strangeness of language is an unusual phenomenon in English literature to-day must be the reason for the exaggerated ideas of the difficulty of Doughty's poetic style. It is a curious fact that there are undoubtedly large numbers of people to-day who patiently and humbly study the music of Scriabine until they come to an understanding of it, yet who would unhesitatingly condemn Doughty's poetry on the evidence of a few pages.

Yet after a careful reading of *Adam Cast Forth* or *The Titans*, this difficulty will practically cease to exist.

Doughty's first poem, *The Dawn in Britain*, was published in 1906. It is an astonishing performance, even when we take into account that the poet, when he published it, had already reached middle life and may for years have practised the writing of poetry. The poem, in six volumes, is in length something over 30,000 lines. Not only does the style, strange though it be at first to modern readers, show no trace of immaturity, but in structure the poem is an imposing architectural whole. It begins with the landing of early Christian missionaries in Britain, then, turning back, pictures the life in Britain from earliest times. Volumes III and IV show the welding of the British tribes into one force against the threat of the Roman invasion under Claudius, and their long, heroic, hopeless struggle. In Volumes V and VI we see the final decline and fall of Britain and, growing up out of this ruin, the small beginnings of primitive Christianity and, through it, the reconciliation of Briton and Roman, beautifully symbolized in the story of the love and marriage of the Roman Pudens and the British maiden Rosmerta. The great Caractacus, a heroic but intensely human figure, is the protagonist of the poem.

It is absurd to hope that such a work will be widely appreciated in these days. Few people, even among those who really appreciate fine poetry, have either the serenity and continuity of outlook or the intellectual humility to read and enjoy this enormous poem. But those who do read it through, slowly and absorbedly, as all fine literature should be read, will find that both style and story take possession of them with a force which is the best proof of their superb quality.

In 1908 appeared *Adam Cast Forth*. We find in it a reaction from the fierce, strenuous temper of *The Dawn*. The poet's mind seems to have cast back to Arabia again. The story shows Adam and Eve, cast out from Eden and driven apart, wandering in search of one another. They meet, and after they have refreshed themselves in the "Valley of The Lord's Rest," an angel tells them that God, to prove their obedience, will send them five days through the desert to reach "The Lord's Earth" which is



given them to possess. In their terrible passage through the waste, Doughty renews his memories of desert journeys. After those five days they reach "Earth's Field" and dwell there in peace. It is the simplest of all Doughty's poems, and remains in the memory like a piece of old, mellow sculpture.

In his next poem, *The Cliffs*, published in the following year, Doughty leaves dateless and remote subjects and turns to England of the present day. It is one of the themes of *The Dawn in Britain* applied to modern times.

It is at first something of a shock to find Doughty writing of railways, aeroplanes, motor cars, wireless, and all the paraphernalia of the present day. Not that I would suggest that he should have stooped to absurd synonyms and paraphrases: that is the negation of poetry. Doughty calls a telegram a telegram, which is as it should be. The trouble is that we are conscious throughout the main parts of the poem of a serious incompatibility of language and subject. That it is possible to make fine poetry of the facts of modern life in archaic tongue is amply proved in the poem which follows this one—*The Clouds*, and it is through a comparison of the two that one of the chief causes of the failure of *The Cliffs* emerges. That *The Cliffs* is a drama and *The Clouds* a narrative, explains to a large extent the respective failure and success of the two poems. For though it is possible to narrate a modern story or to soliloquize through the mouth of a modern character in archaic language without incongruity, it is, I think, impossible so to write dramatic dialogue. That this is so, appears in *The Cliffs* from the outset. The scene opens on a cliff with the solitary soliloquy of John Hobbe, an old shepherd. That soliloquy, nearly 300 lines in length, is a beautiful and satisfying poem in itself. But when two German officers descend in an airship and converse in dialogue, incongruity appears at once. Here are their first words:—

*First Voice.*

*Second Voice.*

*First Voice.*

*Baron.*

Herr Baron, right beneath us wide cliff lies.

Cliff-brow of *perfid*e Albion! So alight.

Avast, Hans! Let down anchor on the grass.

Herr Ingenieur, we sooner than we looked for,  
Here touch to shore.

And it is not only this incongruity of language that mars the poem. Often the action is delayed by prolonged discussions and criticisms of pre-war England which, however justified in fact, cannot be justified poetically or dramatically. Doughty the poet frequently nods and his place is taken by Doughty the critic and politician: he becomes submerged in the minutiae of small evils which obscure the larger aspect of the present. And when the poet nods, his exquisite visual imagination also falls asleep. There is little profit in lingering over a great man's failures, but there is equally little profit in indiscriminate admiration. Though *The Cliffs* undoubtedly contains Doughty's least successful work, it also contains passages and details as lovely as any he has written.

*The Clouds* was published in 1910. In it the subject of *The Cliffs* is continued. England is shown invaded by the Germans: but the form here is narrative and not dramatic, and the poem succeeds admirably. Where, in the former poem, so much of the verse carped and discussed or unfolded in uncomfortable dialogue, in *The Clouds* it bodies forth, as did *Arabia Deserta*, *The Dawn*, and *Adam Cast Forth*, in visible narrative. It is a profoundly English poem. After the solemn, comminatory proem, the narrative advances in a series of vivid pictures, and the language, too, has taken on a suppleness, an appropriateness, which was often lacking in *The Cliffs*. *Easthampton Burned* remains intensely and terribly real in the memory, and *Ely* is full of the mellow richness of English Gothic.

In *The Titans*, which followed in 1916, Doughty reverts to prehistoric times. The theme (embodied in a myth of Titans, Gods, and Mortals) is Man's gradual subjection of the elemental forces and his growing scientific discovery of the world in which he lives.

*Mansoul*, Doughty's most recent poem—it appeared in 1920—is in a real sense the epitome of all his other work. In it the experience of a lifetime—the real experience of *Arabia Deserta* and the imaginative experience of his poems—is fused into a beautiful and luminous whole. Doughty is one, I think, who has reached his religion through a despair of human knowledge. He has found that all the wisdom of the past and all the wisdom

of to-day can teach us nothing of ultimate things. All who reach this final barrier react according to their temperaments. But all great artists, however they react, turn back upon life, because fundamentally they love life. Thomas Hardy, when he reached the barrier, believed that all beyond it was for the worst: but though in word a pessimist, his magnificent preoccupation with life and emotion makes him really a great optimist. For the man who wrote *The Dynasts*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and even the terrible *Jude the Obscure*, life with all its miseries is a wonderful, a supremely valuable thing. It was Meredith's passion for nature and human society that drove him back on life. For him, perhaps, there was nothing beyond the barrier. Earth, he says, is all we have: but to him "Earth" meant a living intelligence, so that at times one is tempted to call him paradoxically a mystic materialist. He was able, at the darkest hour of his life, to exclaim: "Smite, sacred Reality!" and for the unknown future to trust to "Earth,"

Leaving her the future task:  
Loving her too well to ask.

Doughty says that all beyond the barrier is good. He lives "in Faith of the Eternal Good," and turns back on life with a large sympathy and a large serenity.

Doughty is a Christian. He accepts Christ as his guide along the path of human goodness. He has a great capacity for veneration and fine emotion, so that, as regards ultimate things, his religion is, I think, free from dogmas,—the serene aspiration of a golden temperament

. . . meekly adoring the Eternal Verities.

*Mansoul*, the latest, is also the richest, maturest, and in style the most perfect of the poems,—which is saying a great deal, for no English poet living to-day can, I think, be placed on a level with him except Thomas Hardy.

Looking back again over Doughty's eleven volumes of verse, one asks in amazement how much longer lovers of fine poetry will remain oblivious to this mass of beautiful work.

MARTIN ARMSTRONG.